

THIS MONTH

It's been a couple of years since Adobe bought Macromedia to become the undisputed king of all things creative, but this month marks the first time that the two companies' products have been merged together. With Adobe's Creative Suite, you've got all the tools you need, no matter what medium you're working in. To see how successful this integration has been, read our reviews starting on page 46. We've rated every single version of the suite and all the individual applications, bar Premiere CS3, as the current beta version doesn't include many of the new features. We'll be reviewing the full version as soon as Adobe releases it.

With DirectX 10 games just around the corner, Nvidia has released two mid-range chips that support the technology: the GeForce 8600GT and the GeForce 8600GTS. Both feature in our Components section, so you can see just how well they stack up against Nvidia's high-end chips and the current crop of DirectX 9-compatible cards, too.

Finally, if you like the idea of a big zoom lens but don't like the idea of carrying a huge camera around, then we may have the answer for you in our Photography section. Panasonic's Lumix DMC-TZ2 has a 10x zoom lens in a body that's little bigger than a compact camera.

David Ludlow
Deputy Editor

david@computershopper.co.uk



ROCK Meivo

★★★★★

£1,171 inc VAT

Rock's Meivo all-in-one PC looks uncannily like Sony's Vaio VGC-LA1 computer (reviewed in *What's New*, January 2007), but has enough distinctive improvements to set it apart from the Vaio and other space-saving all-in-one computers such as Apple's 24in iMac (also reviewed in *What's New*, January 2007).

The Meivo takes up only a bit more space than a standalone 22in monitor, although it has a limited tilt and swivel. Its large, 22in widescreen monitor is bright and has wide viewing angles, making it well-suited for watching DVDs. It has the same 1,680x1,050 resolution as the Vaio's 19in screen, which isn't quite enough to show 1080p high-definition video as the 24in iMac's 1,920x1,200 display does. It still produces a good picture, however, which you can watch from across the room.

As our application benchmarks show, the Meivo can handle all but the most strenuous of tasks thanks to its plentiful 2GB of RAM and fast Core 2 Duo E6300 processor. It was a little faster than the Vaio in our image-editing and multiple applications benchmarks, but the 24in iMac was quicker than either the Meivo or the Vaio in our video-encoding benchmark.

Unfortunately, the Meivo isn't as capable for playing 3D games. It uses one of Intel's newest integrated graphics chips, the GMA 3000, but it's no better than its predecessor, the GMA 950, for playing the latest games, as our 3D benchmarks show. It couldn't even run our Call of Duty 2 test, although older titles should be playable.

Unlike the iMac, the Meivo has a built-in hybrid TV tuner so you can watch and record either analogue or digital TV broadcasts using Windows Vista's Media Center feature and the included remote control. If you want to record one programme while watching another, you'll

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Mesh Elite E6600 GTS		HTC Advantage X7500		Hitachi Illumina PJ-TX300	
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PC Nextday Zoostorm S-7404		Navicore Personal 2007		LG 32LC2D	
★★★★★		★★★★★		★★★★★	
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★★★★★		★★★		★★★★	
Lenovo ThinkPad X60s		Canon PIXMA iP4300		Canon EOS 400D	
★★★★★		★★★★★		★★★★★	
Panasonic Toughbook CF-Y5		Canon PIXMA mini 220		Canon PowerShot A630	
★★★★★		★★		★★★★★	
Samsung R20		Canon PIXMA MP160		Fujifilm FinePix F20 Zoom	
★★★★		★★★★★		★★★★★	
Toshiba L30-113		Dell Multifunction Laser Printer 1815dn		Fujifilm FinePix S6500fd Zoom	
★★★★		★★★★★		★★★★★	
		Epson Perfection 4490 Photo		Nikon Coolpix S500	
		★★★★★		★★	
		HP OfficeJet Pro L7780		Panasonic Lumix DMC-FZ50	
		★★★★★		★★★★★	
		HP Photosmart D7160		Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ2	
		★★★★★		★★★★★	
		Konica Minolta Magicolor 2500W		Samsung Digimax S850	
		★★★★★		★★★★	
		Samsung ML-2510			
		★★★★★			



have to add another tuner. The built-in speakers are surprisingly loud and can fill a small room, but they sound harsh. The included media centre keyboard isn't suited for prolonged typing due to its springy keys.

Many all-in-one computers tend to be difficult or impossible to upgrade, but many of the Meivo's internal components are easily accessible. A removable panel reveals the mini PCI slots holding the wireless networking adaptor and TV tuner. There's even an empty slot for adding another mini-PCI TV tuner as well as an ExpressCard/54 slot for adding expansion cards, a feature more commonly found on notebooks.

The 250GB 3.5in SATA hard disk can easily be replaced if it's not spacious enough for your needs. There's even enough space for another 3.5in SATA hard disk, but you'll need a proprietary screw-in bracket to fit one.

Alternatively, you could add external hard disks using the four USB2 ports as well as the eSATA and FireWire 400 sockets. If you regularly need to insert USB devices such as flash drives, however, the Meivo's design could quickly prove inconvenient as only one USB2 port is side-mounted, with the rest located in a recessed and hard-to-reach cavity.

You can't connect another monitor or TV to the Meivo as you can with the iMac, but you can record video from sources such as a VCR thanks to the Meivo's S-video and component inputs. You can also connect a surround-sound amplifier to the S/PDIF socket.

The Meivo isn't suitable for gamers and the 24in iMac has a larger, higher-resolution screen. But if you need a compact, fast and easily upgradable PC, the Meivo is an excellent choice.

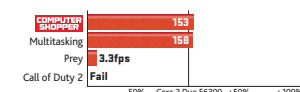
Alan Lu

SUMMARY

- ✓ Compact and upgradable design
- ✓ High-resolution screen
- ✗ Not suitable for 3D games

ALL-IN-ONE PC 1.86GHz Intel Core 2 Duo E6300, 2GB RAM, 250GB hard disk, Intel GMA 3000 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, 22in widescreen LCD, hybrid TV tuner
SUPPLIER Rock 08456 880556
DETAILS www.meivo.tv

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



PC SYSTEMS

FAQ

Q My new computer came with Windows Vista Home Basic pre-installed. Can I upgrade to another version such as Home Premium?

A The Windows Anytime Upgrade control panel allows you to compare your currently installed version of Vista with the available upgrade options. If you have Home Basic, you can purchase an upgrade to Home Premium or Vista Ultimate. If you have Home Premium or Vista Business, you can only upgrade to Vista Ultimate.

Once you've chosen your upgrade option and paid for it, you'll be sent a licence key for your new version of Vista. You'll need the Windows Anytime Upgrade disc that came with your computer. It contains all the available versions of Windows Vista and is used to upgrade your currently installed version. If you don't have one, you can buy one during the buying process.

Alan Lu
 PC systems and storage expert



alan@computershopper.co.uk



Video page 34

Buffalo LinkTheater Wireless-A&G	★★★★
Canon MD101	★★★★★
Freecom DVB-T USB Stick	★★★★★
Sling Media Slingbox	★★★★★
Terratec Cinergy DT USB XS Diversity	★★★★★
Top Up TV TUTV Anytime DTR	★★★★★

Audio page 36

Apple iPod Shuffle	★★★★★
iRhythms A-303	★★★★
Logitech AudioStation	★★★★★
Logitech X-230	★★★★★
Logitech Z-5450	★★★★★
Philips SLA5520	★★★★★
Sandisk Sansa e270	★★★★★
Sennheiser PC156 USB	★★★★
Sony NW-A805	★★★★★

Networks page 38

Billion ByGuard S5	★★★★★
Buffalo Wireless G Broadband ADSL2+ Modem Router	★★★★★
Netgear RangeMax Next Wireless Router	★★★★★
Panasonic BL-PA100KT	★★★

Storage page 40

Crucial 1GB Gizmo! Overdrive	★★★★★
Hitachi Deskstar 7K1000	★★★★
Integral P2 2.5in combo enclosure	★★★
LiteOn Super AllWrite LH-20A1S	★★★
Maxtor Shared Storage II 1TB	★★★★★
Samsung SpinPoint T166-HD501J	★★★★★
Samsung Super Writemaster SH-S182M	★★★★★
Samsung Super Writemaster SH-S183L	★★★

Components page 42

Antec P182	★★★★★
ECS N8600GTS-256MX+	★★
ECS N8800GTS-320MX	★★★★★
Gigabyte 3D Aurora	★★★★
Gigabyte GA-965P-DS3P (Rev 3.3)	★★★★★
Gigabyte GV-RX195P	★★★★★
Intel Core 2 Duo E6700	★★★★★
MSI K9AGM2	★★★★★
MSI NX8600GT OC Edition	★★★★★
Shuttle XPC SD32G2	★★★★★

Software & Games page 46

Acronis True Image 10 Home	★★★★★
Adobe After Effects CS3 Professional	★★★★★
Adobe Creative Suite 3	N/A
Adobe Dreamweaver CS3	★★★★★
Adobe InDesign CS3	★★★★★
Adobe Lightroom 1.0	★★★★★
Adobe Photoshop CS3	★★★★★
Ankh: Heart of Osiris	★★★
Avanquest RadioTracker 2	★★★★★
Cakewalk Sonar 6 Producer Edition	★★★★★
Cloudmark Desktop for Outlook	★★★★★
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	★★★★★
Company of Heroes	★★★★★
Diskeeper 2007 Home	★★★★★
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	★★★★★
FIFA 2007	★★★★★
FlatOut 2	★★★★★
Microsoft Encarta Reference Library 2007	★★★★★
Microsoft Virtual PC 2007	★★★★★
Microsoft Works Suite 2006	★★★★★
Mr Site Takeaway Website	★★★★★
PKR	★★★★★
Roxio Easy Media Creator 9 Suite	★★★★★
Sony Sound Forge 9	★★★★★
Steganos AntiVirus 2007	★★★★★
Supreme Commander	★★★★★
Wild Earth Africa	★★★

BYTE SIZE

HELA DuraFlex Comfort Keyboard

★★★

£49 inc VAT

Hela's DuraFlex Comfort Keyboard is a soft, thin, rubber-textured USB keyboard that can be rolled up for easy transportation and storage. It's also easy to clean and durable. We spilled hot tea and breadcrumbs over it and then submerged it under water. It emerged unscathed.

Unfortunately, the rubbery keys give little feedback, making typing a frustrating experience. We can't recommend it for regular use unless you work in a messy environment. Protective keyboard dust covers are available for half the price. PDA or UMPC users who want a portable keyboard would be better off with an iGo Stowaway portable keyboard.

Alan Lu

SUPPLIER www.posturepeople.co.uk
DETAILS www.hela.co.uk

KINGSTON DataTraveler 4GB

★★★

£29 inc VAT

USB flash drives continue to increase in capacity while dropping in price. Kingston's 4GB DataTraveler's purple and white design is a matter of taste, but it is distinctive. The cap connects to the end of the device so it doesn't get lost.

The DataTraveler performed satisfactorily but unremarkably in our large files test, writing them at 3.28MB/s and reading them at 10.18MB/s. It was noticeably slower in our small files test, however, writing them at 0.21MB/s and reading them at 6.09MB/s.

The DataTraveler is spacious and affordable but if you need a fast flash drive for copying lots of files, Crucial's 1GB Gizmo! Overdrive flash drive is much quicker if not quite as roomy.

Alan Lu

SUPPLIER www.lambda-tek.com
DETAILS www.kingston.com/uk

ACER Aspire iDea 510

★★★★★

£850 inc VAT

Acer's Aspire iDea 510 is the first Media Center PC we've seen from the company in a while. We were impressed by its slim, attractive case, which isn't much bigger than a DVD player. It's quiet, too, even during intensive tasks such as video encoding, so it won't be distracting when you're trying to watch TV or a movie.

You can record one channel while watching another thanks to the two hybrid TV tuners, which can receive either analogue or digital TV broadcasts. Oddly, Windows XP Media Center Edition is included rather than Vista Home Premium, so you'll have to buy the latest version of Windows separately if you want it. XP is still more than capable of managing your media collection, though. A remote and cordless keyboard with built-in touch pad are included, although the keys are too rickety for anything more than casual typing.

A basic set of recording control buttons are mounted on the front of the iDea in case you lose your remote, but this seems like a gimmick since Media Center can also be controlled using the keyboard. The front-mounted display next to the buttons shows useful information such as the currently playing music track.

The iDea comes with a generous selection of ports. You can connect the iDea to your TV using HDMI, SCART, S-video, composite or component cables. You can also record video from sources such as a VCR using SCART, S-video or composite. You can connect a set of 7.1 surround-sound speakers or hook up a surround sound amplifier to the coaxial or optical S/PDIF sockets.

The iDea is fast enough to be used as your main PC thanks to its Core 2 Duo T5500 processor and



1GB of RAM, but if you regularly run demanding applications you'll get better performance from RL Supplies' Modula 5001MC (see 'Also Consider...' below). The iDea had no trouble playing back our high-definition Windows Media videos though. The iDea's GeForce 7600 graphics card is capable of playing the latest games, as our 3D test scores show, but you'll have to reduce the resolution or graphical detail for smoother frame rates.

You may soon outgrow the 250GB hard disk if you're a dedicated telly addict. You'll have to rely on USB or FireWire hard disks, though, as opening the iDea's case will invalidate the one-year warranty. There isn't any space for adding extra hard disks anyway, though, and if you want to replace the DVD writer with

a HD DVD or Blu-ray drive, you'll have to use a notebook-sized slot loading model, which are expensive and difficult to find. At least wireless networking is already built-in.

A memory card reader is hidden under the front flap. It supports all the common memory card types, including CompactFlash and xD.

We like the iDea's unobtrusive design. It's a capable Media Center PC thanks to its wide selection of ports and pair of hybrid TV tuners, but its relatively small hard disk and restrictive warranty hold it back.

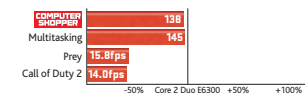
Alan Lu

SUMMARY

- ✓ Quiet; compact and attractive design
- ✓ Wide selection of ports
- ✗ Restrictive warranty

MEDIA CENTER PC 1.66GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T5500, 1GB RAM, 250GB hard disk, 256MB Nvidia GeForce 7600 graphics, DVD+/-RW DL, 2x hybrid TV tuners
SUPPLIER www.laptopsdirect.co.uk
DETAILS www.acer.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



Also consider...

RL SUPPLIES Modula 5001MC

★★★★★

£949 inc VAT

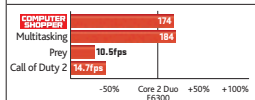
RL Supplies' unassuming Modula 5001MC is a generously specified Media Center PC.

There's plenty of storage space thanks to the pair of 250GB hard disks. By default, one is used to store Windows and your programs while the other is used to house your media library and documents. You can choose to configure them as a RAID 0 or RAID 1 array if you prefer, though.

Unfortunately, the cordless Media Center keyboard feels cheap and uncomfortable to type on, and the Radeon X1650 graphics card isn't ideal for playing the latest games with the highest detail settings enabled. You can still use the Modula for more serious work, however, and the computer did



DESKTOP PC 2.13GHz Intel Core 2 Duo E6400, 2GB RAM, 2x 250GB hard disks, 256MB ATI Radeon X1650 Pro, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, dual digital TV tuner
SUPPLIER RL Supplies 01923 896996 DETAILS www.rlsupplies.co.uk ✓ Dual digital TV tuner; plenty of disk space ✗ No SCART output FULL REVIEW Jul 2007



well in our video-editing and multiple-applications benchmark tests.

A TV can be plugged into the HDMI or standard TV-out ports, but there are no SCART or component video-out sockets. The Modula isn't the most attractive Media Center PC, but it's a good choice for recording lots of TV programmes.

PC NEXTDAY

Zoostorm
5-7404

★★★★★

£1,299 inc VAT



Quad-core PCs can be dramatically faster than their dual-core counterparts but they are usually much more expensive. All the quad-core PCs we've seen previously cost around £2,000, but PC Nextday's Zoostorm 5-7404 is much more affordable.

Despite its comparatively low price, the Zoostorm scored an impressive 438 in our video-encoding test, only a few points behind CyberPower's Infinity SLI 900 PC, which costs £1,000 more (reviewed in *What's New*, July 2007). It wasn't as fast in our image-editing or multiple-applications tests as other quad-core PCs, though, as it uses PC2-5300 RAM instead of the faster PC2-6400 memory. In any case, you'll see the best performance only if you use programs that have been optimised to take advantage of a multi-core processor.

Gamers will be able to play the latest titles thanks to the 320MB Nvidia GeForce 8800GTS graphics card. This displayed smooth frame rates in our graphically demanding *Prey* and *Call of Duty 2* tests, and it will also be able to play upcoming DirectX 10 games.

Keen gamers will also appreciate the Creative X-Fi sound card, which will produce more realistic sound effects in games that support EAX processing. You'll want a better-sounding set of speakers to get the most out of the X-Fi card, though. Although the included 5.1 Philips surround-sound set is loud, the treble sounds harsh and there's a lack of detail.



The 22in widescreen Asus display has an attractive black and silver finish. Its 1,680x1,050 resolution is well suited to watching movies or working on multiple documents side by side. It's not ideal for detailed image editing, though, as it displayed obvious banding in both our colour and greyscale tests.

If the roomy 500GB hard disk isn't spacious enough to hold all your files, you can add extra hard disks to the four 3½in drive bays. Hard disks are held in place by simple sliding latches instead of fiddly screws.

The two optical drives makes copying discs easy, but if you want to add a Blu-ray writer, for example, the

Zoostorm can accommodate three more 5¼in drives.

Sadly, there's only enough space for adding a single PCI card, such as a TV tuner or wireless networking adaptor, unless you remove the riser for two of the rear USB2 ports to make way for another.

The Zoostorm 5-7404 is keenly priced for such a powerful PC. If you regularly use programs that can take advantage of its quad-core processor, then it's a great buy. If you don't, Mesh's Elite E6600 GTS (see 'Also Consider...' below) is better value, and has faster games performance.

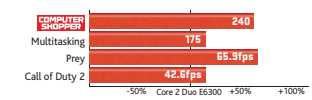
Alan Lu

SUMMARY

- ✓ Generous specification
- ✓ Fast in Windows
- ✓ Comparatively inexpensive

DESKTOP PC 2.66GHz Intel Core 2 Quad Q6600, 2GB RAM, 500GB hard disk, 320MB Nvidia GeForce 8800GTS, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, DVD-ROM, 22in widescreen LCD
PART CODE 3365-7404
SUPPLIER www.pcnextday.co.uk
DETAILS www.pcnextday.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



BYTE SIZE

VERBATIM
Flash Disc
16MB 3 Pack

£9 inc VAT



Verbatim claims the Flash Disc 3

Pack is a replacement for floppy disks. The pack contains three 16MB USB drives, which you can use to store documents.

The discs appear to be cheaply made, and don't feel like they'd last long. They have such a small capacity that speed tests are largely irrelevant. There's room for plenty of Word documents, but only a handful of PowerPoint presentations or photos.

The main problem with the 16MB 3 Pack is its price. The discs work out at £3 each, which is expensive as you can buy a 512MB flash drive from www.ebuyer.com for around the same price.

Chris Finnamore

SUPPLIER www.pixmania.co.uk
DETAILS www.verbatim.com

LOC8TOR
Loc8tor Plus

★★★★★

£93 inc VAT



The Loc8tor Plus is a 21st-century version of the whistle-reacting key fob. The pack comes with a scanner and four RFID bugs, which you can attach to (according to the box) your child, dog, wallet or keys. Using the scanner you select which tag to activate, and the RFID bug will start chirping. The scanner will then guide you to the target with a distance readout and a beeping sound that increases in frequency as you near your lost possession. It has a range of 600 feet.

One of the bugs also has a button to activate panic mode, so if your child or grandmother is in trouble they can activate the bug and lead you to them. It's a brilliant idea, but it's expensive and the scanner feels cheaply made.

Chris Finnamore

SUPPLIER www.maplin.co.uk
DETAILS www.loc8tor.com

MESH
Elite E6600 GTS

★★★★★

£999 inc VAT



Mesh's Elite E6600 GTS shows that gaming PCs fitted with the latest graphics cards don't have to be expensive. The 320MB GeForce 8800GTS should have no trouble playing the latest graphically demanding games.

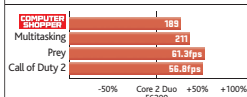
The supplied 19in Hanns.G monitor isn't widescreen, so it's not ideal for watching movies. The Creative Inspire T6100 5.1 speakers sound woolly and muffled overall. A better set of speakers would reveal the high sound quality of the computer's Creative X-Fi sound card. This provides realistic sound effects in games that support EAX processing. Keen gamers can add a second SLI



graphics card for even better performance, although another double-slot card would prevent the use of the spare PCI slot.

Thanks to the quality graphics processor and sound card, Mesh's Elite E6600 GTS is a powerful gaming PC. It's fast in Windows, too, so it's also a capable general-purpose PC.

DESKTOP PC 2.4GHz Intel Core 2 Duo E6600, 2GB RAM, 320GB hard disk, 320MB Nvidia GeForce 8800 GTS, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, 19in LCD
SUPPLIER www.meshcomputers.com
DETAILS Mesh 08447 360440
✓ Fast in Windows and games
✓ Good value
FULL REVIEW Jun 2007



BYTE SIZE

WACOM Bamboo

★★★★★
£70 inc VAT



Wacom's Bamboo tablet is designed for pen-input to a PC, rather than graphics work. It comes with software for Windows XP, but is more at home with Windows Vista and its built-in tablet tools.

You can use the Bamboo for text input, drawing and for Microsoft's excellent Windows Journal, which replicates a traditional notebook. Vista's handwriting recognition is impressive and even coped with our appalling scrawl, so you can use the Bamboo instead of your keyboard.

The bamboo is very responsive and has 512 pressure levels, so you can use it for drawing in applications that support it. With four programmable buttons, a scroll-pad for navigating documents and a wireless pen, the Bamboo is excellent value.

David Ludlow

SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.wacom.com

MARMITEK Invisible Scart 300

★★★★★
£40 inc VAT



A video sender is a cheap way to beam a video signal to a TV in another room. You connect a wireless transmitter to your video source – a media centre PC or CCTV camera, say – and a receiver to your TV.

Marmitek's new receiver is built into a SCART plug, which would be exceptionally tidy, but it also needs a mains adaptor. The connection worked first time, as did the IR repeater, which relays remote control button-presses in the opposite direction. A switch is used to select a 2.4GHz channel away from your wireless network. That done, the picture is as good as composite video gets, bar a bit of ghosting on high-contrast edges.

Paul Sanders

SUPPLIER www.keene.co.uk
DETAILS www.marmitek.com

CHOOSING A... PC System

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

PROCESSOR Intel Pentium D 820
MEMORY 1GB
HARD DISK 250GB
STORAGE 16x DVD writer
SOUND Integrated
SPEAKERS Stereo
GRAPHICS Integrated
MONITOR 19in LCD
EXTRAS 56K modem
CONNECTORS 4x USB2, network
SOFTWARE Windows Vista Home Premium
BASICS Keyboard, mouse
Recommended minimum in grey

1 The minimum specification of PC we recommend, shown in grey above, is a good starting point when working out your ideal system. This PC would cost around £500 and is perfectly capable of running everyday office, multimedia or education software, as well as doing anything on the internet. But it's an unexciting PC. It will be able to play DVD movies, but they won't sound too impressive and modern games are a no-no.

2 The size and shape of a PC is more important than it used to be. A mini PC costs a bit more and it's less upgradable, but it will take up less desk space and look much more attractive. If you're choosing a media centre PC, make sure you get one that fits in with any other electronic equipment in your living room and that it's quiet.

3 Interested in games? Upgrade to a decent graphics card. Budget cards based on the GeForce 7300 GT graphics processor or Radeon X1600 will cope with this year's games, but to play next year's just as smoothly (and enjoy gorgeous graphics today), you'll want anything up to a GeForce 8800 GTX or Radeon X1900XTX.

Look for an SLI or CrossFire system if you want to use two graphics cards to get the best graphics performance. Even if you don't want SLI or CrossFire now, it may be worth getting a system that's capable of being upgraded later.

4 The processor above is powerful and it's dual core, so it will handle intensive tasks. If you're going to be doing a lot of video editing, you should consider upgrading to an even more powerful processor. Intel's Core 2 Duo range is our current top choice; as well as being more powerful, it needs less cooling so your PC should be quieter.

5 If you're not interested in games, you can definitely live with integrated or cheap graphics, but there are plenty more reasons to upgrade the memory, hard disk or processor. If you'll be using your PC for serious desktop publishing, music or photo-editing tasks, you need the same kind of processor, memory and disk space as for games. For video editing consider getting two hard disks, perhaps in a RAID array.

6 A quality sound system will enhance all manner of PC activities. To hear the surround

soundtrack of a DVD at its best, you'll need a quality 5.1 speaker system. Games can also use such a system to throw sound effects around you. If you're not interested in games or DVDs (or you don't want to trail wires all around the room), go for a quality stereo pair with a subwoofer to boost the bass instead.

If you're interested in music or want better-quality sound, you'll need to invest in a dedicated sound card. As well as providing enhanced sound, such as Environmental Audio eXtension (EAX), which tweaks the acoustics to make sound appear to be playing in different environments, you'll get higher-quality outputs and more inputs.

7 17in LCDs are inexpensive, but not very exciting and quite small. A 19in LCD is now standard and has the same resolution (1,280x1,024) but is easier on the eye. Twenty-inch LCDs are available from around £200 and have a higher resolution (1,600x1,200). This makes them better for those who want to edit large photos, documents or spreadsheets.

If you're more interested in entertainment, consider a widescreen monitor. As well as being ideally suited for watching movies, they give you more room horizontally, so you can work on two documents side by side.

Decide if you want a glossy display or not. Glossy displays improve contrast and make images look brighter, but they reflect overhead lights and sunlight easily, which can be annoying.

8 The standard set of connectors can be improved with extra USB2 ports, to which most run-of-the-mill PC gadgets attach, and a FireWire port for fancy gadgets including most digital video (DV) cameras. Look for a memory card reader if you have a digital camera and make sure your camera's memory card is supported.

9 Windows Vista Home Premium is preinstalled on most new PCs. Any extra software bundled should be assessed critically. It may be that you'll never use it. But you may happen across a PC that includes software you'd otherwise have paid for; you'll save lots of money by having it preloaded, although you won't get technical support included.

10 If you have money left over, consider a TV card. This lets you watch TV on your PC screen and record programmes to your hard disk, or capture analogue video from a camcorder.

